

## The American Indian Boarding School Experience: Then and Now

### **DESCRIPTION**

Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a series of Indian Boarding Schools were opened throughout the United States and Canada. These schools were set up as an alternative way to deal with the “Indian problem” after centuries of battles between U. S. and Canadian armies and various First Nations. Rather than fight to remove or exterminate indigenous peoples, the U.S. and Canadian governments created a plan to force the children of the different nations to assimilate to white culture by removing them from their homes and sending them to white-run boarding schools. These schools were often run by Christian missionaries and suppressed the children’s native culture, language, and religion. Enrollment in these boarding schools grew throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, peaking in the 1960s. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that most of these schools were shut down. Even today some boarding schools exist, although now they are administered by the American Indians whose children are educated there.

This lesson plan uses the story “The Spirit Survives: The American Indian Boarding School Experience: Then and Now” by Dovie Thomason, a professional storyteller who is a Kiowa Apache and Lakota Indian woman. This story intertwines personal narrative, the history of Indian schools, and the story of Gertrude Bonnin (later Zitkala Sa), the Sioux woman who went through the Indian schools and afterward became a writer and activist for Indian rights.

This two-session lesson plan offers an accessible way to address this oppressive, rarely taught episode in U. S. history. Students will learn about the dangers of assimilation,



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especially when forced, and of not knowing one's own personal and cultural history. Students will also learn about the ability of a people to reclaim their own history and to move forward even after methodical, genocidal attempts to remove them.

While this lesson plan is designed to take two 45-minute class periods, it could be completed in one class period if students read and/or listen to the story on their own. Students can read and listen to "The Spirit Survives" by going to [www.racebridgesforschools.com](http://www.racebridgesforschools.com) and choosing "The Spirit Survives" under the "Lesson Plans" heading. There they can download the story excerpts in PDF format and listen to the audio excerpts. Make sure students have access to computers that can open PDF and audio files. This lesson can be extended into a longer unit completed over three to four days.

***Recommended Method:*** *Although this will take more time, the best way to complete this lesson plan is to listen to the excerpts in class, stopping after each excerpt to allow students to answer questions and discuss their responses to the story.*

### **PURPOSE**

- To expose students to the history and resilience of American Indians / indigenous people
- To teach about the Indian Boarding Schools
- To examine the importance of telling and learning about personal and cultural history
- To equip students with skills to make critical judgments about history and how it is taught

### **OUTCOMES**

By the end of this lesson, each student will

- Be familiar with the history of Indian Boarding Schools
- Understand the importance of knowing one's own story
- Understand how education can be used to oppress
- Respond to the issues and themes of the story
- Relate their own experience to the story





## The American Indian Boarding School Experience : Then and Now

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### **MATERIALS**

- Teacher Instructions
- Handout #1: Excerpts from “The Spirit Survives: The American Indian Boarding School Experience: Then and Now” by Dovie Thomason
- Handout #2: Discussion Questions

### **LESSON PLAN**

#### **SESSION ONE**

1. Introduction and Summary of “The Spirit Survives” (5 minutes)
2. Excerpt #1 and Pair Share (15 minutes)
3. Excerpt #2 and Pair Share (15 minutes)
4. Wrap Up (10 minutes)

#### **SESSION TWO**

1. Review and Introduction to Excerpts 3 and 4 (5 minutes)
2. Excerpt #3 and Pair Share (20 minutes)
3. Excerpt #4 and Small Group Discussion (15)
4. Wrap Up (5 minutes)



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## TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

### SESSION ONE

#### **1. INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY OF THE STORY “THE SPIRIT SURVIVES: THE AMERICAN INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE” (5 minutes)**

Place students in pairs; students will discuss story excerpts #1-3 with their partner and excerpt #4 with their partner and another pair. Begin with students in pairs so that they can begin discussing excerpts as soon as they finish listening to and/or reading them. Do not let students choose their own partners; either have them count off into random pairs or place them in pairs you believe will be most productive.

Introduce your students to the real-life story “The Spirit Survives” by Dovie Thomason. Explain that they will have the chance to discuss each of the excerpts after listening to and/or reading them.

Today we’re going to begin listening to [and/or reading] excerpts from the story “The Spirit Survives: The American Indian Boarding School Experience: Then and Now” by Dovie Thomason, a Kiowa Apache and Lakota Indian storyteller. In this story, Thomason weaves together multiple stories. She tells the story of Indian Boarding Schools where thousands of Indian children were sent, often against the will of their parents, during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thomason also focuses in on one particular person—Gertrude Bonnin, who later took the name Zitkala Sa—and her experience in the boarding schools and later in life. Finally, Thomason uses her personal struggle to learn more about her own history and how to share that information with her own daughter as a thread to tie all of the stories together.

Thomason focuses on specific historical events in this story and focuses on some big questions and themes. She examines the tension between stories that seem too terrible to pass on and too important to leave untold. This tension amplifies the importance for all of us to know our own personal and cultural stories, especially those stories that do not get taught in schools. Finally, the question of assimilation, especially through education, is raised. This story makes clear that education is not neutral; by teaching one kind of culture and history, schools ensure that students don’t learn about or value other cultures and histories. For example, Thomason says





that she never learned any of the history of her own people in school and doubts whether her daughter will either, even many decades later.

Today, we will listen to [and/or read] the first two of four excerpts from this story. After each excerpt, you will have the chance to share briefly your reactions and thoughts. Tomorrow, we will finish the last two excerpts of the story, and we will end with a longer opportunity to share your own experiences.

## **2. EXCERPT #1 & PAIR SHARE (15 minutes)**

I'm going to give you a handout with an excerpt from "The Spirit Survives" and a handout with discussion questions. We will listen to the story aloud and you can follow along if you like. After we listen, I will ask you to jot down a few of your thoughts and then share them with a partner.

Hand out the excerpts and discussion questions; play excerpt #1. Give students one minute to respond on their own in writing to the questions associated with the excerpt (they should choose the ones they find most interesting). Then ask students to discuss their answers with their partner; each person should take 30-60 seconds to share his or her answer. Ask a few pairs to share their answers with the class; take no more than 1-2 minutes for this. Be sure to keep students moving so that there is time to get to the next excerpt.

## **3. EXCERPT #2 & PAIR SHARE (15 minutes)**

Play excerpt #2. Give students one minute to answer the questions associated with the excerpt (again allowing them to choose the ones that attract them). Then ask them to share their answers with their partner; each person should take 30-60 seconds to share his or her answer.

## **4. CLASS WRAP UP (10 minutes)**

Have pairs share their general reactions to the excerpts with one another and then with the whole class. You may want to have the class brainstorm some lists together, such as what they found most surprising in the excerpts, what the themes of the story are so far, the connections they can make between this event and more recent events, and so on. You might also want to get them thinking about the excerpts they will read during the second





day of the lesson plan and have them forecast what they think will happen next in the story or share their hopes for how the story will end.

## **SESSION TWO**

### **1. REVIEW & INTRODUCTION TO EXCERPTS #3 & #4 (5 minutes)**

Review with students what you heard, read, and discussed during the first session. Consider having a student summarize the readings and discussions that took place during that class to include students who were absent during the lesson and to get everyone “on the same page” for the second half of the lesson. Let students know that they will listen to two more excerpts and have more time for small group and whole class discussion and that they will have the opportunity to share experiences of their own that relate to the story “The Spirit Survives.” Ask students to get together with their pair share partners so that they are ready to begin discussing as soon as the excerpt ends. Be sure to find partners for the students who were absent from the first session; you may want to place those students with already formed pairings so they can catch up quickly.

### **2. EXCERPT #3 and PAIR SHARE (20 minutes)**

Make sure students have the discussion questions from the first session; if they don’t, hand out more. Play excerpt #3. Give students one minute to respond on their own in writing to the questions associated with the excerpt (they should choose the ones they find most interesting). Then ask them to discuss their answers with their partners; each person should take 30-60 seconds to share his or her answer. Have some pairs share their responses.

### **3. EXCERPT #4 and SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (15 minutes)**

Listen to the final excerpt and then ask pairs to join another pair to make a group of four. You may need to have one group of six if there is not an even number of pairs. Ask students to identify a time keeper for this activity to make sure they do not exceed the time allotted for discussion.





#### 4. CLASS DISCUSSION and WRAP UP (5 minutes)

Call students back together and have each group share one major concept, impression, or feeling that they will take away from the story and their discussion. Students may share their own personal experiences. Consider asking students to do some writing on this topic for homework or extending the lesson with one of the ideas below.

#### LESSON EXTENSION IDEAS

1. Have students learn the history of the Indian Boarding Schools. Why were they created? What did people who were not Native American think about them? What were some of the opinions among the First Nations? What are the ongoing effects of these schools? Assign different groups of students to research different parts of the story and bring it all together in a class presentation.
2. After analyzing the way that boarding schools were used to force American Indians to assimilate to the dominant European-American culture, have students brainstorm how education has been used in similar ways with other groups in the past. Then have students research who might be undergoing assimilation today; assign groups of students to study the various issues in education today related to this topic, such as how history curricula are designed, how textbooks are adopted, how “No Child Left Behind” can encourage students to learn by rote rather than through analysis, and how education funding leads to very different experiences for different racial and socio-economic groups.
3. Have students search the internet for lesson plans about First Nations (this is an especially good project for the month of November) and analyze the lesson plans for veracity and sensitivity. Have them present the lesson plans, their critiques, and their suggestions for better lesson plans. The web site <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com> is especially helpful for this project.
4. Buy a copy of the curriculum *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference and Creating Inclusion* (listed in the resource list below) and teach diversity in a more in-depth way.
5. Watch one of the videos or read one of the books listed in the resource list below and discuss it in class.





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## SOME THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE

The words that we use to talk about different groups change over time, and it is important that teachers help their students understand the importance of language and its nuances. Sometimes language is in flux, and we have to use it as sensitively as we can even when there isn't consensus on "correct" usage. For example, "Indian" has long been the term used in the United States to refer to people from the First Nations.

As most of us know, however, "Indian" is a label that was thrust upon indigenous people and does not accurately describe them. The term "Native American" has its own problems as indigenous people were on this continent long before it was "American." Some current terms that are in use are "indigenous," which means any group of people who are originally from a place, and "First Nations," which indicates that there are people who were nations on this continent long before the nations of the United States of America or Canada came into being. "Indigenous" and "First Nations" also have the advantage of linking people with others around the world who are indigenous, allowing for connection and some greater political power.

While "indigenous" and "First Nation" are better terms, they still have the drawback of acting as umbrella terms that tend to erase differences among people. Among First Nations there are many nations, such as Chippewa, Lakota, and Navajo; referring to someone who is from the Apache nation as a "Native American" or "American Indian" or "First Nations' person" is similar to calling someone from the United States a "North American" and then assuming that person is the same as a Canadian! Take the time to discuss these differences with your students while making clear that this is meant to make them more aware of the richness of and diversity among people who come from First Nations not to paralyze them or to make them feel they can say nothing at all!

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## RESOURCES

### BOOKS

Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series. *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*. Ottawa, Ontario, 2008. Documents the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada.

Adams, David. *Education for Extinction*. Lawrence, Kansas, 1995. “A story worth reading and remembering, one that reveals the use of education as a weapon of war, a method of domination. A strong lesson in the potential for education to become a part of a political and cultural arsenal.” American Journal of Education.

Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Philadelphia: New Society, 1996. Written primarily for a white audience but useful for people of all backgrounds.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1996. Loewen critiques the way that history has been taught in American classrooms, focusing on its bland, Eurocentric bias. He urges educators to focus on real, diverse stories that make up our history. Eye opening for teachers and students alike. Very good sections on the history of the First Nations.

O’Halloran, Susan. *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference & Creating Inclusion*. Available at [www.susanohalloran.com](http://www.susanohalloran.com). A two-level curriculum for schools about diversity, race and dealing with difference. O’Halloran approaches diversity, race, and racism in a way that makes an often intimidating subject approachable and even fun. O’Halloran avoids blame and empowers students to uncover their own biases and to recognize institutional racism and to work for both personal and societal change.

Zinn, Howard. *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. Zinn presents American history from the perspective of those who do not traditionally write history—women, people of color, working class people, and so forth. He provides a more thorough explanation of the interaction between white immigrants and indigenous people in the U. S., from first contact through the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, than most history textbooks.

Zitkala Sa. *American Indian Stories*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1921 (and later editions).





## VIDEOS

Berhaag, Bertram (Producer/Director). *The Complete Blue Eyed*. Available at [www.newsreel.org](http://www.newsreel.org). This edition contains multiple versions of the "blue-eyed/brown-eyed" experiment that demonstrates how swiftly prejudice affects people. Originally used with grade school students, this exercise has been used with adults with the same results. This edition comes with a facilitator's guide. 93 minutes total; can be watched in shorter segments.

Four Worlds International Institute for Human and Community Development. *Healing the Hurts*. 2004. Available at [oyate.org](http://oyate.org). Viewers join Native American participants from Canada and the US, during a four-day culturally-based healing process for understanding and recovering from this type of traumatic experience. (NOTE: This is a very emotional and provocative film, powerful in so many ways.)

Lucasiewicz, M. (Producer). *True Colors*. Northbrook, IL: MTI Film & Video, 1991. An ABC video with Diane Sawyer that follows two discrimination testers, one black and one white, as they look for jobs and housing and try to buy a car. A good look at institutional racism. 19 minutes.





## **ORGANIZATIONS and WEBSITES**

[www.doviethomason.com](http://www.doviethomason.com). Website for the storyteller Dovie Thomason. Provides information about the storyteller, her stories, and contact information.

<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>. This site focuses on teaching about First Nations through literature, but the web site is maintained by a professor who is registered at Nambe Pueblo in New Mexico and who entertains all kinds of issues related to respectful teaching about and engagement with First Peoples. Many links to resources and thoughtful evaluations of resources by and about First Peoples.

[www.boardingschollhealingproject.org](http://www.boardingschollhealingproject.org). A coalition of groups seeking to document boarding school abuses so that Native communities can seek healing and justice. Good links to resources.

[www.cradleboard.org](http://www.cradleboard.org) Buffy Sainte-Marie's educational website with lesson plans and resources. Also the site to find the full text of her story "Making Things Better". Invaluable site!!

[www.dreamcatchers.org/fptv](http://www.dreamcatchers.org/fptv). First Peoples TV. Contains documentaries by and for indigenous people.

[www.oyate.org](http://www.oyate.org). Oyate is a Native organization working to see that our lives and histories are portrayed honestly, and so that all people will know our stories belong to us. For Indian children, it is as important as it has ever been for them to know who they are and what they come from. For all children, it is time to know and acknowledge the truths of history. Only then will they come to have the understanding and respect for each other that now, more than ever, will be necessary for life to continue (description from the website). Fantastic resources available here for all grades and for teachers.

If you would like to engage Dovie Thomason to perform at your school, go to [www.doviethomason.com](http://www.doviethomason.com).

### **Note to Teachers:**

The **bolded** text can be read out aloud and followed word for word; however, you may want to read over the material a few times so that you are comfortable putting these ideas into your own words, in the way in which you normally talk to your students.





## **Handout #1: Excerpts from “The Spirit Survives: The American Indian Boarding School Experience” by Dovie Thomason**

### **PART 1**

They tell me it was a chilly morning for August. I don’t remember; but they say it felt cold for the end of summer in Pennsylvania.

I was standing in a graveyard with my daughter. She was almost thirteen at the time, just a few years ago. I was standing by all these graves and headstones---all the same---uniform---they just marched on in my view in military precision.

I was standing in a graveyard with my daughter on Labor Day weekend. She couldn’t quite understand what we were doing there and I hadn’t explained it fully. It was the *last* weekend of her summer vacation and here we were---standing in a graveyard. We weren’t alone. There were lots of people walking around us, the soft murmuring of their voices as they went from grave to grave, finding and naming them, putting tobacco and leaving children’s toys on the graves. There was the gentle sound of voices, many not speaking English; but I heard other voices that kept intruding into the quiet. Other voices that made me reach out my hand; I really wanted to protect my daughter there.

There were soldiers across the street, right behind us, and they were talking loudly---so loudly. It was Labor Day weekend; it shouldn’t have been that busy at this military checkpoint—all these cars from so many different states. It wasn’t a big military base—just a residential barracks for military families. And there’s the War College...and heightened security alerts in recent years. It had been a supply post for the British during the French and Indian Wars—cavalry trained there rode West for the Indian Wars...rode West with Custer. There have always been soldiers.



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I felt uneasy, even a bit scared. They were going through people's cars, checking ID's. They seemed a bit uneasy, too. There were too many Indians in Pennsylvania that day--- too many for things to be routine in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

I reached out for my daughter. She was restless, maybe sensing my unease, *maybe* just wondering why we were there instead of at the beach. She was shifting from foot to foot in her trendy sneakers.

I touched her hair, running my fingers through it. I started smoothing and braiding her hair. It's a thing mothers do---and it comforts both people. And as I ran my fingers through her hair, she was looking out at all those graves. She was reading them, I could tell.

Suddenly, she said, "There's a lot of Oneida graves here." Her father's family is Oneida from Canada. "A LOT of Oneida graves", she said. I could hear the unspoken question in her voice.

So I said, "Honey, none of your family is in these graves. Quite a few of your relatives went to school here, but none are buried here. Grandpa went to residential school, but he didn't go here. That was later. This school was started before Grandpa was born." I told her. "It was 1879. The school started right here with 86 children --- We're here, after 124 years, to put up a memorial marker so people passing by know what this place is. Not many people know about this place. **Because it's military, everyone thinks this cemetery is for soldiers. It was the end of a battle; but these graves are for Indian children.**"

She looked out, trying to put the story together for herself. "Lakota graves---lots of Lakota graves. Apache graves---even more Apache graves. That's you: Apache and Lakota. But they still call them Sioux here."

I was too choked with emotion to speak.

There's some stories you don't want to tell your children.

There's some stories you need to tell your children.





So I said, “You’re right, baby. But it was the end of the 1800’s; they didn’t know to call us Lakota then. The first to be brought here were Lakota children, 86 of them, chiefs’ children—Spotted Tail, Red Cloud, American Horse. The Apache children came in 1886, about the time Grandma Dovie was born. They’d been prisoners of war at Ft. Marion in Florida, once Geronimo surrendered. His name was Goyathlay in Apache. His grandson is buried right over there.”

I had to stop...so many children taken...so many never made it home...

And I had to tell my daughter this story.

“The first children were brought here from Rosebud and Pine Ridge, where my mother’s family was from. Commissioner Morgan of the Dept. of War called these first *students* : ‘good hostages for the good behavior of their people’. They were brought here in October, just three years after the Lakotas had defeated, some still say ‘massacred’, Custer and his Seventh Cavalry at Greasy Grass---They call it the Little Bighorn. And the children of the people who had defeated Custer were getting off a train in Carlisle, PA, that fall. It was midnight; it was cold. They walked two miles from the train station. I’ve made that walk.” I pointed, “They came up through there. That used to be the entrance. That was the gate they walked through, wrapped in the blankets their mothers had made. People in this town had mixed feelings about them being here. I’ve got a copy of the newspaper article from 1879. I’ll show it to you sometime, if you want.”

She looked at me. “How do you know all this stuff? We haven’t studied this yet. Maybe I’ll get this in high school.”

And I thought, *She won’t get this in high school*. I didn’t get it in high school. But I just told her, “No, they didn’t teach this when I was in school. And they don’t teach this in many of the schools where I tell stories today. And Grandma Dovie didn’t teach me this either.”

My Plains Apache grandma who told me so many stories, she never talked about the boarding schools. Grandma went away to mission school in Oklahoma. Her children were taken away, *maybe she sent them*, to the Indian boarding schools. There’s hardly an Indian alive today without some link to the boarding schools. But no one in my father’s family talked about that; it was a story they never told me.





There's some stories you don't want to tell your children.  
There's some stories you have to tell your children.

I never got to know my Lakota grandmother. My parents were divorced when I was two and I moved away to Texas with my Dad, growing up around his family. As a child, my mom and her side of the family weren't even a memory. I didn't know anything about that part of me until I was fifteen....another divorce and I got myself emancipated, independent, on the move and looking for answers. I was only a couple of years older than my daughter...

I found my mother in Chicago, but I didn't find my answers. She didn't have them or she just couldn't talk. Her mother, my Lakota Grandmother, was dead—from suicide five years earlier. Mom wouldn't talk about her. I learned the rules in my mother's silent house quickly. Her rules were simple:

Don't ask about her family

Don't ever mention your father.

Don't quote Grandma Dovie all the time

Don't talk about Indian.

That's all in the past...Ancient history...We don't talk about that.

She told me only one Indian story in the 25 years I knew her. As a teenager, she went for her first job in Chicago, just before WWII. There was a sign posted outside the restaurant where she went to apply that said, simply: "No Indians or Dogs need apply."

The rules were simple...It was long ago; it does no good to talk about it.

There's some stories you don't want to tell your children.  
There's some stories you have to tell your children.





## **PART 2**

So I went away to college. I had a “minority academic scholarship”. There were only two scholarship students at this posh private school in the Midwest. One was a sharecropper’s daughter, a Black girl from Mississippi, and I was the other. I got a free ride to that school; supported, ironically, by a wealthy patron from a railroad dynasty.

They had “big plans” for me: I would become a linguist, working for the US Government--the CIA was interested in my “talents”---I was fluent in French...and Spanish...and English. I spoke THREE foreign languages as a college student and I still didn’t know one word of either of my own ancestral languages.

*But I had my own Plan.* I decided I would minor in Native Studies—back then it was Indian Studies. That college had no courses *or* professor for Indian Studies and I was, *of course*, the only Indian on campus. So it was kind of an Independent Study.

It was the Sixties; there was a lot of independent study. Alternatives were good; *they even seemed possible*: civil rights, war resistance, civil disobedience, peace and justice and social change...And so I was allowed to undertake a course of “independent study”. Besides, Indians were “cool” in the Sixties. For the first time since the Wild West shows, NOW it was “cool” to be Indian.

I spent a lot of time alone in the library. I haunted the library. It would be kind to say they had “limited resources”. The section on Indians was half the size of today’s paltry selection at Borders –maybe a shelf of aging volumes.

I did find a book on the shelf at that library. I remember the day. It was called American Indian Stories---really catchy title. But there wasn’t much published *about* us then; few, if any, authors were Indian.

I pulled it off the shelf and it just fell open in my hand. The author’s name was Gertrude Bonnin, she was an Indian and it was her autobiography. In the preface, some anthropologist wrote: “One of the most powerful women ever to live in the U.S.”





And I remember thinking, “I don’t know about her”. *One of the most powerful women ever to live in the U.S.—an INDIAN WOMAN??* And I don’t know this name...

Remembering that day in 1966, the way that book just seemed to flip open to a chapter called “School Days of an Indian Girl”. And I thought, “This is just so weird. Here I am, the only Indian girl at this school and now I’m standing here with this book in my hands.” And that’s when the library started to haunt *me*.

I began by reading that first chapter, the story of when she was a girl and went away to school. She *wanted* to go away to school. Her family tried to stop her. She had been raised in her mother’s tanned leather lodge—hearing the old stories in the cold evenings when people sat, visiting. Her brother had been taken away to boarding school and her mother didn’t want to lose her baby girl to the government schools. Her brother had only gone because the Indian agent had threatened to keep food rations from the family if his mother wouldn’t sign her mark on the papers she couldn’t read.

Young Gertrude wanted to go to school. She’d heard about school from the missionaries she called the “big-hearted men with big hats”. They spoke of a school in a place where there were so many apples that they were liked rosy clouds above your head. Gertrude became willful, even stomped her foot in frustration with her mother. She finally begged her aunt to persuade her mother to sign.... again. She wanted to go to the Land of Apples. It was 1884, she wasn’t yet eight years old, but still she was the “big sister”, traveling for the first time on a train, looking after her smaller friends who were only three or four years old. She didn’t know they would be traveling over 700 miles from her mother’s old style lodge; she didn’t know she wasn’t going to see her home for over six years.

Her first night there was cold and snowing. The school wasn’t ready for them. There were no beds for them. Luckily, their mothers had sent them with soft, beaded blankets that they had made. So, those small children, sleeping away from their relatives for the first time in their lives, slept on the floor, wrapped in their mothers’ blankets.





The next day, one of the older girls said to her, “Today they are going to cut our hair.” Gertrude was frightened by that---hair was cut for grief and mourning---or shingle-cut to show the cowardice of the wearer. “They are not going to cut my hair”, she told the other girl. “There is no reason for them to cut my hair.” And she was told, “They are strong. There is no point in resisting.”

But the next morning, when they came to get Gertrude, that little girl who had been raised free on the Plains had made up her mind. She’d decided, “I will resist.” She hid under furniture, but they dragged her out. She was screaming as they tied her to a chair. She felt the cold metal of the scissors against the back of her neck. She heard the thud of her heavy braids, hitting the floor. She cried herself to sleep that night.

She cried with no mother, no aunties, no relatives to comfort her. An older girl in the dormitory did what big sisters do. She crawled into Gertrude’s bed and comforted her in their language, her mother’s language, using those soothing words you use to calm a crying baby. But she also warned little Gertrude, “Don’t talk these words where they can hear you. It will be bad if they hear you. They will hurt you.”

Now, my daughter knew that part of the boarding school story. She didn’t know about Gertrude, she didn’t know much about Carlisle...

There’s some stories you don’t want to tell your children....

She hadn’t learned it from me. She’d learned about it from her Grandpa. He tried to tell the stories of when he was in boarding school to the grandchildren. Grandma did not approve, back then. She didn’t see why he would want to talk about those things to children. He hadn’t told those stories to his own children and she didn’t see why he would tell them to the grandchildren.

There’s some stories you don’t want to tell your children....

She used to stop him. “It upsets him,” she’d explain. “It upsets him. There’s no point in talking about that. It does no good.”

There’s some stories you need to tell your children....





So Grandpa started talking to me, and my daughter had heard some of those stories from him, too. He was only four when he was taken from his grandfather and put in the residential school. He spoke only the Oneida language he'd learned from his family. In the twelve years he lived at the school, he was never allowed to visit his grandfather and his grandfather's language was beaten out of him, despite sneaking out of sight and talking it with other lonely Oneida boys. He also talked about working in the fields, digging potatoes with those boys, and how they would hide a potato or maybe two in their clothes. It was all they dared try to get away with, for fear of the beating if they got caught stealing. They'd sneak down to the boiler room and hide them behind the boiler. At night, when they were supposed to be asleep, they'd creep down the stairs in the dark and eat those roasted potatoes. He'd been whipped for eating food that he was told didn't belong to him; but they still hid food from the fields, chancing another beating. They ate the scraps the staff threw out of the windows for the birds. They were children and they were so hungry.

"We raised chickens for the government", he'd say. "Chickens and eggs. But we never got to eat chicken or eggs. We got mush'n'milk every meal, felt like. They brought out chicken and eggs for the government visitors who came to see how the children were 'progressing'. It showed them how 'productive' we were."

My daughter's grandfather DOES get upset when he tells stories about the boarding schools...

The Mush Hole, he calls it, still defiant--as using that name would get you a strapping when he was a boy at the school.

There's some stories you need to tell your children....





### **PART 3**

And so I was telling my daughter about this little Indian girl who took me walking through the boarding schools, as I read her story. Though she later became Gertrude Bonnin, and later still changed her name to show her resistance to assimilation, she was still little Gertie Simmons, only eight years old when she first decided to resist.

A lot of her classmates got sick at the schools---the most menacing diseases were tuberculosis and influenza and malignant measles, but the most common was trachoma, an eye infection that often causes blindness, but is preventable with adequate diet and proper sanitation. The schools were overcrowded and insufficiently funded; the children were overworked and homesick. In her first year at school, Gertrude saw more than one in ten of the original students sent home due to health problems, where they often failed to recover and infected their families. Others died at the school. Their parents were not allowed to see them before they died, nor were their bodies returned home for burial. The children's grief and homesickness took on physical form: They developed chronic stomach pains. They walked in their sleep, waking ready to fight. They cried themselves to sleep, to bedwetting and nightmares.

Alone and without hope of returning to their families, many of those children figured out what was expected of them in this strange environment. They knew how to be attentive and now they studied this new situation. Young Gertie had loved to listen and watch and learn from her relatives on the Plains. She had wanted to go to school. So she became a good student. She had a musical talent on the violin and a voice made for song. She soon had a Quaker sponsor, impressed by her "progress", who took an interest in advancing her education.

Now, there were two schools of thought behind the idea of the boarding schools. There were the reformers, who decried the brutal killing of the Indian people. The Indian Reformers of the day were predominantly Quakers and missionaries, eager to explore new ways to "civilize" the Indians and worried about "the pernicious influence of tribal life" on the reservations. They believed that there had to be another solution to the "Indian Problem", beyond total extermination.





At the end of the Indian Wars, 1880-1890, about the time my Grandmas were born, there were only about 250,000 of us Indians left. Ten or twenty million or more when Columbus came ashore....And in just four hundred years, only 250,000 remained. And nearly half of those left at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the “innocents”, the children. The wars had come to the children.

But there were good people who wanted the killing to stop.

And there were others who wanted to kill them all. General Sheridan, a former Union officer overseeing Indian Territory—Oklahoma--, was hosting a conference of 50 Indian chiefs in 1869 when he said, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian”.

There was a Captain named Pratt who had been in Indian Territory for eight years commanding a unit of African American "Buffalo Soldiers" and Indian Scouts. When the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho and Caddo warriors (including one woman warrior) were rounded up in 1875, he took them in shackles as POWs to Fort Marion, in Saint Augustine, Florida, to a prison fort that had been built by the Spanish in the 1600's. He took them there, issued them uniforms, and then enlisted the aid of good ladies who volunteered their time to educate the Indian captives – their former enemies – in exchange for archery lessons. He thought that he could educate “Indian” out of people. He revised Gen. Sheridan’s philosophy: “In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian and save the man.” His “experiment” could accelerate social evolution, forcing his prisoners from savagery to civilization. He thought it a noble experiment; it would solve the Indian Problem—assimilation, not extermination. His words: “...see if that will not end this vexed question and remove them from public attention, where they occupy so much more space than they are entitled to either by numbers or worth”.

He imagined that, in one generation, removed from culture, language, land and relations, there would effectively be no Indians left.

He presented his idea to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, a part of the Dept. of War, and Commissioner Morgan looked at the costly campaign to defeat Geronimo and the Apaches, the public’s growing weariness with war, all the sensational press and outrage





after Custer's defeat ---pros and cons. And he decided (quote): "It was cheaper to educate Indians than to kill them." And, he realized, it would have the same result...In one generation there would be no "Indians".

And so they reopened a military base that had been abandoned since the Cavalry Training School had been shut down. That empty military barracks in Carlisle, PA, became the first Indian Industrial School in 1879. Within five years, there were more than two dozen off-reservation government boarding schools based on that model, just in the US. Gertrude Bonnin went to one of them, my grandma to another, my daughter's grandpa to another---- and they never told me this story.

But there's some stories you need to tell your children....

With the help of her sponsor, Gertrude got a scholarship to college---an academic scholarship. She was a mixed-blood who'd succeeded at boarding school---with oratorical talent, musical gifts, skill in debate and moving poetry recitations. At college, she was exposed to other speakers---her Quaker teachers and lecturers. There she learned of abolition, women's suffrage, civil disobedience and slave uprisings that reminded her of her own people's resistance. In her first oratorical contest, she gave a speech about the mistreatment of her people and their right to be "free and equal" in America. She won first prize and was chosen to represent her college in the state competition. There, her opponents hung a banner, ridiculing the college for being represented by a "squaw".

She pursued her studies until she became so ill from the recurring health problems that began in her youth at the boarding school that they moved her off campus, as they had with children when she was younger, fearful that they would die on school grounds---and be counted in the mortality statistics for the schools.

As she remained too weak to go back to school, she returned to South Dakota to visit her mother, after years of distance. Once "home", as she wrote in her autobiography, she discovered that she felt she no longer belonged there. "My mother had never gone inside a schoolhouse, so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write... she thinks the white man's papers were not worth the freedom and health I had lost by them...I was neither a wild Indian or a tame one. Even nature seemed to have no place for me."





She turned her back on her home and faced East. She went to Carlisle, PA and became a teacher at the Indian Industrial School. She even helped recruit children to go there. It appears she was an inspired teacher: Her students learned from her the power of the well-spoken word. Her debate team argued whether colonial policies forced the Massachusetts tribes into war. Dressed in buckskins borrowed from the Smithsonian, she performed a recitation of Longfellow's Hiawatha for President McKinley that earned her the praise of the press and her colleagues, who called her "our Minnehaha". She "summered" in New York City as the guest of the socialite and acclaimed photographer, Gertrude Kasebier. Harper's Bazaar included her on their list of "Persons Who Interest Us". She was The Indian Experiment's success story...

But she left her teaching post at Carlisle after only a year and a half. She'd begun using her debating skills in opposition with Colonel Pratt and the other Carlisle staff. She felt it wrong that their Indian cultures were no part of the children's education.

Another patron funded her move to Boston to attend the New England Conservatory of Music in 1899. She was to perform at the Paris Exposition. While in Boston, she received the news of the sudden death of her fiancé, Thomas Marshall, a Lakota who was a student at Dickenson College and was in charge of the little boys' dorm at Carlisle.

His grave, beneath a weeping cherry, is marked by the largest headstone in that cemetery where I stood with my daughter. It is of darker stone, and is conspicuous, surrounded by the small white markers of the graves of children he looked after. We walked over to it as I continued this story, wanting my child to understand that history is PEOPLE. And that LIVES were changed forever by places like Carlisle.

We laid sweetgrass on the grave.

"She didn't return for his funeral", I said, "She sent white roses---for pure love? I don't know, how can I imagine what she was feeling or thinking?"

"But something happened to her and how she saw herself and her life. Maybe it wasn't just his death, maybe it was all that was dying....I don't know..."





But, from that day on, she quit being Gertrude Bonnin. She became Zitkala Sa, Red Bird. She put aside the Victorian gowns her wealthy patron had given her and began to wear a buckskin dress, like the one taken from her as a child at the school. She wore her hair in long, heavy braids. And she lost her scholarship and her wealthy patron.

She started writing *and getting published*, provocative articles in Harpers and Atlantic Monthly about her own experiences in the boarding schools and the shattering loss of identity that the schools called “education”. Col. Pratt denounced her for “being utterly unthankful for all that has been done for her by the pale faces, which in her case is considerable.” The Carlisle newspaper, in their review of her book, wrote: “There is enough gloom in life as we go along from day to day, without treasuring up disagreeable experiences of the past.”

She went home to South Dakota, determined that her place in the world was to educate Indian children, to give them better than she had gotten. She saw that the old people who remained were dying, and deserving of better treatment. They needed someone to listen to them, before all was gone. She listened, and she wrote their words and about their situation. She told her readers how wrong it was for a government to experiment on a race of people, to call Indians a “problem”, and to force on them a type of education that would mean their extinction as a people. **Her passionate thoughts, the stories the old people told her, her memories of her own childhood....all of these writings were published in 1901----in a book called American Indian Stories....**

Now, I can’t tell you all that I’ve learned about Gertrude Bonnin...not even everything I told my daughter that chilly morning. She’s haunted me for over forty years. I’ve read everything she ever wrote and much of the little that was written about her, until recently. For all of my adult life, she’s had a place in my heart and mind. There were times when I felt she was a part of me. Her story remains, in profound ways, a part of my story.

Only lately did I come to understand that I had, in many ways, found my lost Lakota grandmother in the stories I read in that book that found me in that long-ago library. Sometimes, when I tell our old stories, I couldn’t tell you, in truth, if I was telling a story my grandma told me or a story of Zitkala Sa’s.





#### **PART 4**

I had fallen silent in the cemetery. My daughter gently touch my hand, “Grandpa wants us.”

He was waving to us from across the cemetery. We had a dedication ceremony to go to. It was something I’d been working on with descendents of the Carlisle survivors. I’d been pulled into the project after meeting Barb Landis, a passionate and good-hearted woman who works with the local historical society there in Cumberland County. She’s committed years of her own time into the Carlisle Indian School records, making that information freely available online for Indian people and, especially, the Carlisle descendents. We’d made application and convinced the State of Pennsylvania to put up a historical marker by the graveyard on that military base that was, once again, occupied by soldiers and the enduring War College. It was a beginning, that marker, so that people would not be confused at the sight of those uniform white headstones. Something kept out of sight now finally brought into clearer vision. We wanted to honor their memory, and let the world know who the children were in those graves so far from their homes. To tell at least some of the story of the more than 10,000 Indian children who passed through those gates.

The descendents donated the money for the marker, the Viola WhiteWater Foundation that I chair helped fund the dedication ceremony and Barb’s website, that shares so many boarding school stories and untold histories. Hundreds of people whose families and lives were changed forever by the conflicted legacy of those schools were now moving with us, leaving the graves and gathering quietly.

Grandpa met us and leaned down to my ear. “I want to talk”, he said.

“Are you sure?” He’d surprised me. “You know there’s a microphone, Dad, you’ll have to use the microphone with this crowd.”

“Well”...He didn’t look at the crowd, he looked at his granddaughter, “I still want to talk.”

She didn’t know about the lawsuit he was a part of, a class action suit against the government of Canada, the Church of England and others, for the abuse of Indian children at the residential schools. He didn’t want money or a settlement from the government. He





just wanted someone to say it was wrong. He wanted someone to hear his story and acknowledge that what was done to him and so many Indian children was wrong.

When he first told me about the lawsuit, I asked him, “Have you told your sons about this?”

I was married to one of them at that time and had a strong feeling this was something he didn’t know about his Dad. He hadn’t met my eyes when he answered, “No, I won’t tell the boys. You tell the boys.”

So, I told “the boys”---all fathers themselves. I told them their father’s story: a hungry child in a cold and lonely dorm, not tucked into bed by his mother, not able to see his father’s face watching over him.

There are some stories you need to tell your children.

And now he wanted to talk, with a microphone, in front of hundreds of strangers. I said, “That’s okay, Dad, then you can talk. You just get up there and tell your story.”

“I’m not telling no story”, he said. “You tell the story; I just want to talk.”

And he got up there and talked. I just remember him, talking that day, in front of his family and all those other families---not strangers once they told their stories. And I remember him crying as he talked. And he’s kept talking. He’s one of the many who’ve told their stories to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. He gathered with others on his reserve with similar stories when the Prime Minister apologized for the abuses of the schools recently.

And neither Grandma nor Grandpa shy away from conversations of memories of the residential schools any more—my daughter interviewed them and others last year for her senior research. She heard more stories like those she’d heard that summer day by the graves...and shared them with teachers who knew nothing of this part of our collective history. There’s not a person alive in America not affected by this shared history---

A lot of people talked that day, a lot cried. There were stories of relatives who’d done well with the education they got at Carlisle, going into Indian service, the military, marrying





and raising families. And there were sadder stories, bitter stories, old men speaking of wounds still raw, of wrongs done that no lawsuit can right, of abuse and addictions and lost friends, shattered families.

But there was time for everyone to tell their story. Everyone got to talk....*and be heard*...

About the time I learned of Gertrude Bonnin, I first heard Buffy Sainte-Marie. She's another hero who changed my life during those tender years in the 60's, when Indians were "cool"....

Through the Nihewan Foundation that she began in 1969, she created the Cradleboard Teaching Project online in the Nineties. It is an interactive, cross-cultural learning space, born of her vision of "joyfully replacing the old inaccuracies with reality, to the lifelong benefit of Indian children". I love the idea of doing this work "joyfully"—as Barb Landis AND my elders would say: "in a good way..." darkness calls for light....

So, I turned to her words, as I've turned so often to Zitkala Sa's, to answer my questions: What do we do when we hear a story like this boarding school story---a story of America's unresolved war against a race of people...when we peel the scab off a wound that can't heal until we give it the proper attention?

What do we *do* when we hear that kind of story?

I'll tell you the worst of what *we* do....We get mad, we get bitter, we get self-destructive, we hurt ourselves, we hurt other people, even those we love, we give up hope....we remain victims...

What do "others" do when they first hear these stories? They feel guilt, they feel shame, they analyze, they justify, they deny, they say it was long ago....

Well, Buffy created an analogy on her website to shed some light-- a *story* to suggest a way of dealing with these hard things that she calls *Making Things Better*—also known as *Guilt and Bitterness*. I am grateful for her willingness to let me share it, in my own words, in this story. Pilamaye...





Imagine Indian women, ancestors, walking across the Plains. They're carrying bags. They're bending over and picking something up off the earth. It must be precious; they scan the prairie, they gather and carry their full bags home.

It's not food they're gathering. It's not firewood. It's buffalo dung. Now, they're not picking up the fresh stuff. They're picking up the *old* dried manure.

I think that the story I've just told you is like that old buffalo dung.

And what Buffy said is that if you take something like *fresh* buffalo droppings and you smear it on your face until it's what people see of you.... "I'm very angry....look at this....see my bitterness??"

Or you pick it up and cover your face with it, wearing it as your badge of identity, "See?? I feel so ashamed...I'm so guilty, I can't cope."

It's not useful, and it keeps us from seeing each other clearly.

You wait until it dries; you give it some time. And then you learn that it has its uses. You can do that magic that only Human beings can do: you can make fire.

It can burn, it can shed light, it can make life-saving heat. It's like you extend the length of the day. You can cook up something healthy and new; you can build a community around a fire; you can read a book; you can dream... It is FUEL...

Or you can take that dried manure and spread it on the earth to help make things grow strong and healthy...but you have to be patient enough to let time turn it into something positive...

I don't know what we're going to do with all this shit. It's a story I've been journeying with all of my life.

This isn't a story I wanted to tell you...

This isn't a story I wanted to tell my daughter.

But *I'm* a mother now—and I have my own "rules"





If I have to tell her, I have to tell you.

If our children need to live with this story, then everyone does.

There's some stories you just need to tell.

We've survived Columbus.

We've survived the cavalry.

We've even survived Kostner

We've survived near extinction.

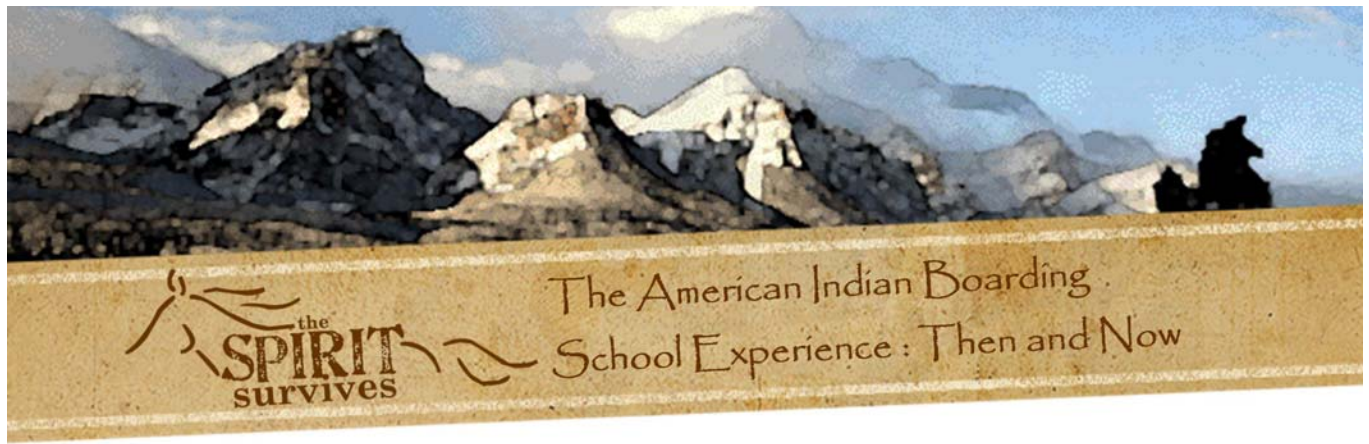
We've survived the schools.

We need a generation that does better than survive.

*Mitakuye Oyasin*  
*All My Relations*

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## Handout #2: Discussion Questions

### Directions

After listening to each excerpt, take a minute to read the following questions and write down your reactions. You may not have time to address all the questions; focus on those that grab your attention. Then share your answers with a partner.

### Excerpt #1

Dovie takes her daughter to a graveyard for the installation of a memorial marker identifying the site as a place where Indian children from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School are buried. This trip causes Dovie to think about the stories she wishes she didn't need to share with her daughter but knows she must.

1. Dovie notes that people are leaving tobacco and children's toys on the graves. Why are they doing this 124 years after the children were buried there?
2. The soldiers that Dovie notices while there make her think of other soldiers. Knowing that the story is told from the perspective of an American Indian woman how does the imagery of soldiers and military affect you? What does it make you think about?
3. Why do you think it has taken so long to have a memorial marker placed to identify the graveyard and who is buried there? Why did people bother to have the marker placed and to visit the graves of people they never knew?



4. Dovie's daughter wonders why she doesn't know the history of the Indian Boarding Schools and thinks she'll learn about it in high school, but Dovie knows she won't. Why isn't this story being told in schools? What have you been taught in school about the First Nations in the United States?
5. Dovie's own mother tells her not to talk about the past, either personal or cultural. Why? What of your own history are you encouraged to remember or to forget?





## Excerpt #2

Dovie tells of her own experience going away to college, being the only Indian on campus, and deciding to study her own history, even if she has to do it all by herself. This memory of her own education leads into stories of two other students: Gertrude Bonnin and the grandfather of Dovie's daughter, both of whom went to Indian Boarding Schools.

1. How do you make sense of the information in this excerpt? Was there anything that surprised you?
2. If you know about the boarding schools, how did you learn about them?
3. If you don't know about the boarding schools, why do you think you never heard about them?
4. Dovie finds the autobiography of Gertrude Bonnin, an important native writer and activist, in her college library, and learns about Bonnin's experience going to an Indian Boarding School. Bonnin begged to go to the boarding school—why? How was her experience different than what she might have hoped for?
5. Bonnin's Sioux identity is disregarded and violated almost immediately at the school: her hair is cut and she isn't allowed to speak her own language. Why are these two things traumatic? How might they have affected Bonnin and the other students at the school?
6. Why would the white, European-American teachers and school leaders focus on issues like hair and language?
7. The grandfather of Dovie's daughter had similar experiences while in boarding school; he remembers being hungry much of the time. Why do you think boarding schools were created for Indian children if they didn't intend to treat the students well? Remember that Morgan said: "It was cheaper to educate Indians than to kill them." What do you think the point of these schools was?





### Excerpt #3

Dovie tells the story of Gertrude Bonnin, from her earliest experiences in the boarding schools, to her “success” as a graduate of and teacher at an Indian Boarding School, to, finally, her reclaiming of her Sioux identity. Interwoven with this story is the history of Indian Boarding Schools as they were founded as a way to defeat Indians without having to continue in their wars with them.

1. Dovie says that by the end of the 1800s only 250,000 Indians were alive, down from 10-20 million who lived at the time of Columbus. What happened to the Indian population? Jot down what you know about the genocide and “removal” of various indigenous people.
2. Although the number of Indians had been greatly reduced, the U. S. government and many citizens still saw Indians as a “problem.” What was that “problem”? How did Indian Boarding Schools act as a solution to the “problem”?
3. Indian Boarding Schools were used to effectively “exterminate” Indians without killing them. How?
4. Now that you have read about the way schools were used to assimilate Indians into the dominant culture (white, European American), can you think of ways that education might be used today to assimilate other groups of people? Identify those who might be at risk of losing their culture, language, and history in the educational system.
5. Dovie says that Gertrude Bonnin was “The Indian Experiment’s success story.” Why was she considered a success and by whom?
6. What do you think causes Bonnin to leave behind that success? How does she reclaim her own identity?
7. Bonnin made a clear break with her Indian Boarding School past with her name and became an Indian activist. What did Bonnin gain by becoming Zitkala Sa, a writer and Indian activist? What did she give up?
8. Why do you think it was important for Dovie to learn the story of Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala Sa while a college student? Why is it important for Dovie to tell her story today?





**Excerpt #4: For this final excerpt you and your conversation partner should join with another pair to discuss any of the following questions that interest you. Assign one of you as a timekeeper so that you finish in the time allowed.**

Dovie ends her story by returning to the graveyard in Carlisle, PA where the memorial marker is being dedicated. She tells the story of having worked to get the memorial and of the grandfather of her daughter deciding to speak at the dedication. Finally, Dovie imagines how people might hold onto their cultural and historical memories, even of oppression, in ways that are creative and life giving.

1. After many years of silence, Dovie's daughter's grandfather begins to tell his story of being in an Indian Boarding School. Why did he want to talk now?
2. Does knowing our stories—personal, familial, cultural, national—make a difference? To whom? How?
3. Dovie mentions the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, where many indigenous people have told stories of being oppressed because of their cultural identity at government residential schools. The Canadian government later apologized publicly for the abuses in the schools. Should governments apologize for such abuses? To whom should they apologize and how? Should governments make reparations, such as money or land or social services (healing), to indigenous people?
4. Dovie uses Buffy Sainte-Marie's metaphor from her article "Making Things Better" (also known as "Guilt and Bitterness") of dung—fresh v. dried—to think about how stories can be used personally and in community. Both dung and stories can be useful or harmful depending on what stage they are in. Think of a story of your own—personal or cultural; is it fresh or dried? How might it be used to harm? How might it be used to heal?
5. Dovie uses a recurring refrain in this story: "There's some stories you don't want to tell your children. There's some stories you need to tell your children." Why do the stories Dovie tells here *need* to be told? What have you learned from them today? What more would you like to learn? What can our culture learn from these stories?

